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->From the Editor's Keyboard
"~~~~~"

"Saying it like it is!"

Well, here we are the day after Christmas, and the "final" issue of the year. Personally, I can't wait for this year to end because it has been a long and dreadful year.

It's ironic that Joe mentions his family's holiday escapades this year, especially with his dog. Joe's tales brought up numerous memories that my wife and I have enjoyed over the years with our two dogs. Unfortunately, those memories were cut all too short last week - our "son" Butkus passed away last Saturday.

As I mentioned last week, Butkus was doing well, albeit a slow-paced improvement. We saw him last Friday, and he seemed, to us, to be on the road to recovery. The doctors were doing all that they could to wean him off of the oxygen so he could breathe on his own and be able to come home within a few days. But the day after we saw him, one of the ER docs thought that there was "excess" air in his chest and wanted to validate that with an x-ray. The x-ray verified her suspicion, and they opted to drain the excess. That seemed to help. However, we got a call a couple of hours later informing us that he had died. We immediately went to the hospital to say our final goodbyes.

It's been an incredibly tough week, and not getting much better. We can still "see" Butkus everywhere, anticipating his usual begging for a MilkBone biscuit, or barking at the FedEx truck as it passes by the house, or sitting by one of my windows watching for any movement outside, or laying curled up on the couch having one of his typical dreams. None of us, including Butkus' "sister" Buffy, has been managing his loss very well. He was with us for more than 11 years, and that time was full of joy. He was our best friend, and dearly missed.

So, even though my year is ending on a sad note, and the new one starting with a heavy heart, I hope that all of you have had a good year, and a promising new year to come. All of us here at A-ONE appreciate your spending another year with us, and look forward to another year. It's been 10 years already - hard to believe!

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. Would you believe that there were a whopping 6 new messages in the NewsGroup this week? That's right. Six of 'em... I hope that things pick up, or it'll take a month to come up with a week's worth of messages.

I can remember a time when my major task was to decide which of the many hundreds of weekly messages to use. Now my major task is to try to squeak a column out of the messages or save them to add to next week's. On weeks like this one, it's a no-brainer... they go in the bin to add to next week's.

So, I guess I've got lots of space here to talk about stuff.

Today is the day after Christmas and I sit here with the remnants of a Christmas tree and presents that've been mixed thoroughly with a rambunctious dog who's never seen Christmas trees or presents before (we didn't put up our Christmas tree last year BECAUSE of the dog).

Actually, she's done pretty well with it, and we've only had to shoo her away from the tree a time or two, and I've already stopped comparing her to Marley the lab from Marley & Me by calling Marley "the world's SECOND worst dog", a twist on the book's subtitle "Life With The World's Worst Dog".

Of course, Stormy (our lab-mix pup) looks at us with those big, soulful, sad eyes and promises to do better... right up 'till the next time.
[grin]

Of course, Stormy got more presents than my wife and I combined, but that's okay. We get to play with them with her... IF she lets us.

It's always amazed me that a creature who is so willing to share life and love can be soooooo selfish where toys are concerned. When she zeros in on one of her favorite toys, my wife and I seem to exist only peripherally and even then only when we can actually enhance Stormy's enjoyment, like throwing the ball or Frisbee for her.

Well, she IS a dog, after all, and I guess we'll cut her some slack.

I've been a 'dog person' all my life, and I can't imagine not having a dog anymore. I had quite a dry spell, not having had a dog of my own for... ohhh... twenty years or so. After my Siberian Husky died, I needed some 'downtime' without a dog to constantly compare to him. Once I got married, a dog was out of the question, since our landlord didn't allow dogs or cats.

Of course, we did have other, smaller pets... Hamsters, fish, a prairie dog... but they weren't the same as having a dog. Having a prairie dog as a pet was an incredible experience, and I wouldn't have traded our time with him for anything else, but he wasn't really a pet we could take for a walk or train to do 'dog tricks'. You don't train a prairie dog to be a pet... he trains you to be a prairie dog.

He was incredibly social and very loving... except during his mating

season. Even after having him 'fixed', from late October to February, he was an unholy terror. You could be petting him one moment and he'd be docile as a lamb, then a moment later he could be chattering, nipping and scratching at you, ready to draw blood. It was just the way he was, and while the peaks of his agitation were high, they never lasted very long, and the intensity of his positive emotions the rest of the time were amazing and actually very touching.

But still, despite his common species name, he was not, in fact, a dog. He was a rodent, closely related to the ground squirrel. As interesting and as loving and as comforting as he was, he just was not a dog. And there really IS no substitute for a canine companion. There are those who will tell you that a cat is the only pet to have, but you've really got to be a 'cat person' to subscribe to that philosophy while a 'dog person' will usually be more open to the possibility that some people WILL prefer cats. Having said that, I've had cats too. It's just not the same as having a dog.

Heh heh... you're not going to believe this, but as I'm sitting here typing this (sitting on the living room couch with laptop on my lap), Stormy came over to me and sat down next to me and ever so gently placed her chin on my shoulder.

Okay, everybody all at once now... "Awwwwwwwwww" [grin]

Well, I couldn't think of a better note to end on than that one, so I'll finish up with a quick reminder to not drink and drive on New Year's Eve, and a single request that you donate a little to the local food share or homeless shelter.

Of course, in keeping with the bulk of this column, I guess I SHOULD mention that dog rescues and pounds could use a couple bucks from you as well... but that's up to you. I know you'll do the right thing.. I trust you.

So c'mon back next year and we'll see how things went. And let's hope that there'll be more stuff in the NewsGroup and that we keep meeting here every week for a long time to come.

'Till then, keep your ears open so that you'll hear what they're saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!

Videogames May Do The Aging Brain Good

Older adults might want to take an interest in their grandchildren's video games, if early research on the brain benefits of gaming is correct.

In a study of 40 adults in their 60s and 70s, researchers found that those who learned to play a strategy-heavy video game improved their scores on a number of tests of cognitive function.

Men and women who trained in the game for about a month showed gains in tests of memory, reasoning and the ability to "multi-task."

The findings suggest that videogames that keep players "on their toes" might help older adults keep their brains sharp, the researchers report in the journal *Psychology and Aging*.

This is the first published study to suggest as much, so it's important not to overstate the findings, said senior researcher Dr. Arthur F. Kramer, a professor of psychology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Still, he told Reuters Health, the results are "very promising," as they suggest that strategy-based videogames can enhance reasoning, memory and other cognitive abilities that often decline with age.

The study included 40 older adults who were randomly assigned to either the video-game group or a comparison group that received no training in the game. Over 1 month, the gamer group spent about 23 hours training in "Rise of Nations," an off-the-shelf video game where players seek world domination.

Ruling the world, the game group learned, requires a complex set of tasks, including military strategy, building cities, managing economies and feeding people.

Study participants who trained in the game ended up improving their scores in several areas of a battery of cognitive tests, Kramer and his colleagues found.

More research is needed to confirm and extend the findings, Kramer said. It's not clear, he noted, if other strategic games would have the same benefits, or if the effects seen in this study persist over time.

Still, the findings are in line with research suggesting that older adults can improve their cognitive health by staying both physically active and mentally active through activities such as reading, writing or other hobbies.

"Playing videogames with their grandkids would also be a great idea,"

Kramer noted, "because we know that social interactions - along with physical exercise and intellectual challenge - also enhance the cognitive abilities of older adults."

EA To Offer 'Spore' DRM-Free

Starting Monday, Electronics Arts will sell its popular video game Spore free of any digital rights management restrictions.

It's part of a slew of titles which EA will offer on Valve's Steam distribution platform, according to a report by Ars Technica.

Besides Spore, the collection will include Warhammer Online, Need for Speed Undercover, Mass Effect, and FIFA Manager 09. Crysis, Crysis: Warhead, and SiN Episodes: Emergence are already available on the service, and there are more on the way.

Prices for the DRM-free versions are said to be on par with what the games would sell for in a box in a retail store.

It's a move likely to win EA some points with gamers after the disastrous public response to its DRM policy for Spore. Originally the company locked the game using DRM software called SecuROM to no more than three machines, which it later upped to five.

Sequels Keep Video Games Buzzing in 2008

Despite the sluggish global economy, video game sales remained recession-proof in 2008 as game sequels were snapped up by fans and music games struck the right note.

Sequels like MTV Games' "Rock Band 2," Bethesda Softworks' "Fallout 3" and Konami Digital Entertainment's "Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots" won over game critics and consumers.

"In uncertain economic times, gamers do what every other consumer does - focus on quality brands," said Sid Shuman, senior editor at GamePro Magazine.

"If game purchases are limited, gamers will flock to core titles that are guaranteed to satisfy like "Call of Duty: World at War," "Gears of War 2" and "Grand Theft Auto IV." Think of them as gaming comfort foods."

2K Games' "Grand Theft Auto IV," which was released back in April, has sold over 11 million copies worldwide. The first next generation story in the award-winning franchise presented gamers with an open world sandbox to explore.

Xbox 360 gamers will be introduced to a new storyline come February 17 when "The Lost and the Damned" expansion pack is released digitally via Xbox Live with the new episode introducing Johnny Lebitz and his biker gang, The Lost.

With the average age of a gamer today 35, mature-rated games like

developer Epic Games' "Gears of War 2" have risen to the top of the global charts. This sci-fi shooter that sent Delta Squad into the heart of Planet Cera to take out the monstrous Locust Horde sold over 3 million units in its first month.

In the battle between Microsoft and Sony in the sci-fi sequel department, Microsoft's Xbox 360-exclusive "Gears of War 2" nudged Sony's PlayStation 3-exclusive "Resistance 2" by an aggregate review score of 94 percent to 87 percent, according to GameCritics.com.

Activision returned to World War II after taking a year off in 2007 to introduce "Call of Duty: Modern Warfare" and gamers were eager to experience the Pacific Theater of War in "Call of Duty: World at War."

The franchise has sold over 35 million units around the globe and remains a top draw on Xbox Live.

Although Electronic Arts' "Madden NFL 09," the 20th installment in that franchise, and "NCAA Football 09" once again attracted enough loyal gridiron fans in the U.S. to place high in the charts, the music game genre surpassed sports.

The one-two punch of Activision's "Guitar Hero" and MTV Games' "Rock Band" have achieved success with both hardcore and casual gamers. "Guitar Hero: World Tour," "Guitar Hero: Aerosmith" and "Guitar Hero III: Legends of Rock" helped propel the franchise to global sales of over 23 million, according to The NPD Group, Charttrack and GfK.

"In the aggregate, I expect "Guitar Hero" will sell through around \$800 to 900 million at retail globally this year, while "Rock Band" probably will sell through half that figure," said Michael Pachter, videogame analyst, Wedbush Morgan Securities.

"However, "Rock Band" appears to have a huge lead in the sales of downloadable content."

Nintendo's Wii ushered in a whole new gaming audience, and as a result, Nintendo sequels like "Mario Kart Wii" and "Super Smash Bros. Brawl" each sold over 4 million units through the end of November in the U.S., according to The NPD Group.

Nintendo creator Shigeru Miyamoto introduced a balance board that allows gamers to exercise and do yoga with "Wii Fit," which has topped U.S. sales of 3.5 million

And Nintendo wasn't the only one pushing creativity. Sony Computer Entertainment and developer Media Molecule delivered the first user-generated game experience with "LittleBigPlanet" on PS3. Gamers have already created over 100,000 custom levels, which have generated over 20 million plays.

"I think the very nature of the games industry has changed," said Anita Frazier, videogame analyst, The NPD Group. "Yes, there is still a dedicated group of core gamers and the really great more traditional games will still sell a lot of units, but there is so much more possibility now imaginable with content for videogame systems."

A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Will Google and Microsoft Own the Web?

It's something of an open secret that Mozilla, the organization behind the open source Firefox Web browser, gets most of its funding from Google - 91 percent, to be exact.

The deal gives Google top placement in Firefox's search engine bar. But now that Google is also shipping Chrome, its own branded browser, some critics are asking whether the search engine giant's deep pockets have allowed it to gain too much influence over the Web browser market.

This week, Mozilla CEO John Lilly admitted that his organization's relationship with Google is "more complicated than it used to be" in light of the current funding arrangement. But Sun Microsystems CEO Jonathan Schwartz goes even further, claiming that because the market is controlled by just a few giant companies - namely Google and Microsoft - the Web browser has become "hostile territory" for application developers. Could the days of an open Web be coming to an end?

The technologies used to build Web pages - including HTML, JavaScript, and Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) - are all open standards, maintained by industry consortia. No one company owns them. But experimental features often appear in new browser releases first, then are integrated into the official standards later. One example is Google's Gears technology, which is built into Chrome and is available as a plug-in for Firefox and Internet Explorer. Gears is widely expected to influence the upcoming HTML 5 standard.

That's all well and good, except that arguably only Microsoft can compete with Google's share of the browser market. For example, Opera is a longstanding alternative browser that is often praised for its compliance with Web standards, but its market share is but a fraction of that of Firefox or IE. Because of Opera's narrower reach, a new feature introduced in Opera might be seen as less significant, and therefore be less likely to become part of the public standards.

Sun's Schwartz has good reason to fear a market where large companies wield an undue influence over widely-used technologies. A few years ago, Sun fought a protracted legal battle with Microsoft over the Redmond-based giant's nonstandard implementation of Sun's Java programming language. Sun argued - successfully - that Microsoft's actions amounted to an attempted hostile takeover of Java.

Rather than see the same scenario play out on the Web, Schwartz argues that developers should avoid the "hostile territory" altogether. Instead of the browser, he says, developers should build applications using Sun's new JavaFX technology.

But this seems somewhat disingenuous, considering that JavaFX is so far almost entirely the brainchild of Sun, and is therefore less open than

any browser.

But there are other reasons to be concerned about Google's stake in Firefox and Chrome, too. Some privacy advocates worry that Google's influence over the browser market gives it access to too much user data, which the company collects for the purposes of its massively lucrative online advertising business.

What do you think? Does the overwhelming influence of Google and Microsoft on the browser market mean the Web is destined to become just another proprietary platform? Or will the influence of open source and open standards bodies ensure that the Web remains a free, public resource? Sound off in the PC World community forums.

Notebook Shipments Overtake Desktops in New Study

Shipments of notebook computers edged passed desktop sales in the third quarter for the first time, according to data from the research firm iSupply.

Preliminary figures for the quarter show notebook PC shipments shot up about 40 percent from the same period a year ago to 38.6 million, according to iSupply. Meanwhile desktop shipments fell about 1.3 percent to 38.5 million.

The numbers underscore a broader shift toward portable computing as more functions like e-mail and Web surfing migrate to mobile phones and the popularity of inexpensive "netbooks" used mainly for Internet access grows.

"The trend has accelerated and will continue going forward," AmTech Research analyst Dinesh Moorjani said.

He expects computer makers to ratchet down production of desktops by 20 percent in the fourth quarter while notebook production should remain flat.

The research firm IDC also predicted this month that sales of laptops would fair better amid a deepening recession. IDC projects portable PC shipments will grow by 15.2 percent in 2009, while expecting a 6.7 percent decline for desktops and servers using PC microprocessors.

Microsoft Grants Windows XP A Reprieve

Some PC makers now have an extra four months to sell Windows XP.

The BBC reported Monday that Microsoft has extended the deadline for smaller PC builders and resellers to obtain licenses for the discontinued operating system from the previous deadline of January 31, 2009 to May 30, 2009.

"Microsoft is making accommodation through a flexible inventory program that will allow distributors to place their final orders by January 31, 2009; and take delivery against those orders through May 30, 2009," a

Microsoft representative said in an e-mailed statement. "This is not an extension of sales."

Even after May 30, however, it's still not the end of XP. The operating system will be available on ultra-low-cost PCs until June 30, 2010, and the low-end Windows XP Starter Edition will continue to be available in emerging markets until the same date.

Plus, big PC makers plan to offer PCs with Vista Ultimate and Vista Business that have been factory downgraded at customers' request until July 30 next year.

Microsoft May Release Windows 7 Beta at Show

Attendees at next month's Consumer Electronics Show (CES) could get the first public look at Windows 7, the next version of Microsoft's client OS.

At its Professional Developers Conference in Los Angeles in October, Microsoft said it would release the beta early in 2009.

Though nothing has been confirmed, signs are pointing to sometime in January and possibly the CES show in Las Vegas as a likely release date. CES is scheduled for Jan. 8-11.

A member of Microsoft's public relations team in the U.K. said in an e-mail that at the show, "Microsoft will be making some significant announcements including Windows 7." She did not specify exactly what the news around the OS would be. But several blogs, including All About Microsoft, have reported that beta testers are expecting a Windows 7 beta any day.

Furthermore, Microsoft wrote on a Web site for its Microsoft Developer Network Conferences (MDCs) that attendees of those conferences, some of which are scheduled for mid-January, can expect a Windows 7 beta DVD.

Some of the MDCs were this month and the site gave Microsoft an out if the beta wasn't released in December, saying that "the DVD will be shipped to attendees when it becomes available." A Windows 7 beta was not released at those conferences, and the next MDCs are scheduled for Jan. 13 in Chicago and Minneapolis.

Microsoft expects to release Windows 7 in early 2010, although some industry observers expect it may be out by the end of 2009 because of lackluster customer response to Windows Vista.

Many business customers in particular have opted to skip Vista and run XP until Windows 7 is available.

Microsoft Has New Windows 7 Download Link

Microsoft's Web site has a new page with info on the Windows 7 beta, including a download link and info on "What's coming in the Windows 7 beta." However, the download link isn't quite live yet, and as for

what's coming...well, you've probably already read a bit about the new operating system. According to the site,

"Great ideas are often simple and clear. Here's ours: We're making Windows 7 for you. This means we're:

- * Tailoring it for laptops
- * Making it work the way you do
- * Designing it for web services
- * Building it for entertainment
- * Engineering it to be easy to own and manage

The site begs the question, when will the links be active? Popular blogger Ed Bott has been postulating that CES will mark the date, what with Steve Ballmer's eagerly anticipated keynote. But that's not for another three weeks. Is simply MS getting ready early? Or are they preparing a little holiday surprise for us all?

Australia To Test Internet Filter Next Month

The Australian government said Tuesday it would begin testing a pilot system next month to filter harmful information from the Internet, amid criticism that any such plan would be a technical failure.

The government's cyber safety policy aims to place a mandatory filter on the web to shield children in particular from accessing illegal and inappropriate material.

But Internet user groups, the pornography industry and others have opposed the plan, saying any such measure would be impractical to enforce, block access to some legitimate websites and slow down Internet speeds.

Communications Minister Stephen Conroy said the government was aware of the technical concerns about the plan.

"And that is why we are conducting a pilot to put these claims to the test," he said in a statement.

Conroy said the trial, which would be conducted by several Internet service providers from mid-January, would provide evidence on the impact of content filtering.

Internet users lobby group Electronic Frontiers Australia said the trial would likely show the government "that the technology just isn't there to do what they want to do."

"If they want to pursue the child-safe clean feed... it's impossible to do it in an highly accurate way. Trying will slow down the Internet," spokesman Colin Jacobs told AFP.

Jacobs said he was concerned about the government introducing a secret blacklist of banned websites.

"We wouldn't go so far as to say the government is going to implement something on the scale of the 'Golden Shield' in China and that they are going to crack down on political speech or anything like that," he said.

"But the issue is that it's only in countries like that where there exist secret government blacklists that are controlled by the powers that be that determine what people can and can't see."

Uproar in Australia over Plan To Block Web Sites

A proposed Internet filter dubbed the "Great Aussie Firewall" is promising to make Australia one of the strictest Internet regulators among democratic countries.

Consumers, civil-rights activists, engineers, Internet providers and politicians from opposition parties are among the critics of a mandatory Internet filter that would block at least 1,300 Web sites prohibited by the government - mostly child pornography, excessive violence, instructions in crime or drug use and advocacy of terrorism.

Hundreds protested in state capitals earlier this month.

"This is obviously censorship," said Justin Pearson Smith, 29, organizer of protests in Melbourne and an officer of one of a dozen Facebook groups against the filter.

The list of prohibited sites, which the government isn't making public, is arbitrary and not subject to legal scrutiny, Smith said, leaving it to the government or lawmakers to pursue their own online agendas.

"I think the money would be better spent in investing in law enforcement and targeting producers of child porn," he said.

Internet providers say a filter could slow browsing speeds, and many question whether it would achieve its intended goals. Illegal material such as child pornography is often traded on peer-to-peer networks or chats, which would not be covered by the filter.

"People don't openly post child porn, the same way you can't walk into a store in Sydney and buy a machine gun," said Geordie Guy, spokesman for Electronic Frontiers Australia, an Internet advocacy organization. "A filter of this nature only blocks material on public Web sites. But illicit material ... is traded on the black market, through secret channels."

Communications Minister Stephen Conroy proposed the filter earlier this year, following up on a promise of the year-old Labor Party government to make the Internet cleaner and safer.

"This is not an argument about free speech," he said in an e-mail to The Associated Press. "We have laws about the sort of material that is acceptable across all mediums and the Internet is no different. Currently, some material is banned and we are simply seeking to use technology to ensure those bans are working."

Jim Wallace, managing director of the Australian Christian Lobby, welcomed the proposed filter as "an important safeguard for families worried about their children inadvertently coming across this material on the Net."

Conroy's office said a peer-to-peer filter could be considered. Most of today's filters are unable to do that, though companies are developing the technology.

The plan, which would have to be approved by Parliament, has two tiers. A mandatory filter would block sites on an existing blacklist determined by the Australian Communications Media Authority. An optional filter would block adult content.

The latter could use keywords to determine which sites to block, a technology that critics say is problematic.

"Filtering technology is not capable of realizing that when we say breasts we're talking about breast cancer, or when we type in sex we may be looking for sexual education," Guy said. "The filter will accidentally block things it's not meant to block."

A laboratory test of six filters for the Australian Communications Media Authority found they missed 3 percent to 12 percent of material they should have barred and wrongly blocked access to 1 percent to 8 percent of Web sites. The most accurate filters slowed browsing speeds up to 86 percent.

The government has invited Internet providers to participate in a live test expected to be completed by the end of June.

The country's largest Internet provider, Telstra BigPond, has declined, but others will take part. Provider iiNet signed on to prove the filter won't work. Managing director Michael Malone said he would collect data to show the government "how stupid it is."

The government has allocated 45 million Australian dollars (\$30.7 million) for the filter, the largest part of a four-year, AU\$128.5 million (\$89 million) cybersafety plan, which also includes funding for investigating online child abuse, education and research.

One of the world's largest child-advocacy groups questions such an allocation of money.

"The filter may not be able to in fact protect children from the core elements of the Internet that they are actually experiencing danger in," said Holly Doel-Mackaway, an adviser with Save the Children. "The filter should be one small part of an overall comprehensive program to educate children and families about using the Internet."

Australia's proposal is less severe than controls in Egypt and Iran, where bloggers have been imprisoned; in North Korea, where there is virtually no Internet access; or in China, which has a pervasive filtering system.

Internet providers in the West have blocked content at times. In early December, several British providers blocked a Wikipedia entry about heavy metal band Scorpion. The entry included its 1976 "Virgin Killer" album cover, which has an image of a naked underage girl. The Internet Watch Foundation warned providers the image might be illegal.

Canada, Sweden, the United Kingdom have filters, but they are voluntary.

In the United States, Pennsylvania briefly imposed requirements for service providers to block child-pornography sites, but a federal court

struck down the law because the filters also blocked legitimate sites.

In Australia, a political party named the Australian Sex Party was launched last month in large part to fight the filter, which it believes could block legal pornography, sex education, abortion information and off-color language.

But ethics professor Clive Hamilton, in a column on the popular Australian Web site Crikey.com, scoffed at what he called "Net libertarians," who believe freedom of speech is more important than limiting what children can access online.

"The Internet has dramatically changed what children can see," said the professor at Charles Sturt University in Canberra, noting that "a few extra clicks of a mouse" could open sites with photos or videos of extreme or violent sex. "Opponents of ISP filters simply refuse to acknowledge or trivialize the extent of the social problem."

Verizon Awarded 'Largest-Ever' Cybersquatting Judgment

A federal court in Northern California has awarded \$33.15 million to Verizon Communications in what the company is calling the largest cybersquatting judgment ever.

Verizon, which announced the judgment Wednesday, had filed the case against OnlineNIC, a San Francisco-based Internet domain registration company. Verizon had claimed that OnlineNIC used Internet names - 663 to be exact - that were chosen to be easily confused with legitimate Verizon names, according to Verizon.

It might hard, however, for Verizon to actually collect on the judgment, which was a default ruling, or one entered against a defendant who fails to answer a summons. No one appeared in court on OnlineNIC's behalf or in its defense, Verizon said.

We weren't able to get through to OnlineNIC by phone (the line just rang and rang), and an e-mail request was not immediately answered. The company claims on its Web site that it's an ICANN-accredited registrar--but only through 2006. And the site offers a mailing address in Oakland, Calif., not San Francisco.

The award amount was calculated based on \$50,000 per domain name, Verizon said.

"This case should send a clear message and serve to deter cybersquatters who continue to run businesses for the primary purpose of misleading consumers," Sarah Deutsch, Verizon vice president and associate general counsel said in a statement. "Verizon intends to continue to take all steps necessary to protect our brand and consumers from Internet frauds and abuses."

Verizon, which says it has won a string of similar cases, is part of a not-for-profit coalition founded last year that fights cybersquatting.

Online retailer Amazon.com Inc. on Friday reported its best holiday sales season yet, even as sales and traffic at U.S. store chains were the weakest in decades, sending its shares up nearly 4 percent.

Analysts have pointed to Amazon as a rare bright spot in this year's holiday shopping season due to its scale and flexibility, as retailers try to outdo each other with deep discounts to lure consumers during a recession.

Online sales were also helped by winter storms that hit large sections of the United States on the last major shopping weekend before Christmas.

In a release titled "Amazon.com's 14th holiday season is best ever," the company said more than 6.3 million items were ordered on its site worldwide for the peak shopping day of December 15, amounting to 72.9 items ordered per second. On its peak day, it shipped more than 5.6 million units.

However, the company gave no financial details regarding the sales, such as how its margins fared with the discounts seen across the retail sector.

Stifel Nicolaus analyst Scott Devitt said Amazon's day of peak orders represented a 17 percent rise from a year ago, while its peak shipments represented an increase of 44 percent. He rates the share a "buy" with a \$61 price target.

Amazon shipped merchandise to more than 210 countries, and said it shipped more than 99 percent of orders on time for holiday deadlines.

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